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THE VATICAN GUIDELINES AND THE JEWS

by Marc H.Tanenbaum

Few documents issued by the Vatican in recent years have received the world-wide attention that has been accorded to the "Guidelines" on Catholic-Jewish relations. Formally released on January third at a press conference in Vatican City, the document - whose official title is "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration "Nostra Aetate" (that is, the Vatican Council's Declaration on Non-Christian Religions, adopted October 28, 1965) - was reported prominently in the pages of the major secular papers on an international scale.

In addition to the dramatic front-page coverage given to this announcement by the New York Times, which also published the full text of the "Guidelines" as well as the response of several Jewish groups, virtually every official Catholic diocesan newspaper provided front-page stories, and most with sympathetic headlines. ("Vatican urges closer Catholic-Jewish ties," was the headline across the front-page of the Long Island Catholic. The Pittsburgh Catholic gave featured it as a lead story with a four-column headline, "Anti-Semitism condemned: Vatican asks stronger Catholic-Jewish ties." The Catholic Telegraph of Cincinnati wrote, "Closer Ties Urged Between Christians, Jews.") This pattern of "philo-Semitic" reports was repeated in numerous Catholic papers in Western Europe, Latin America, and quite likely elsewhere.

From the vantage point of "public relations," there can be little question that the Vatican "Guidelines" had a positive effect. Given the fact that the Jewish community has been smarting from a "bad press" in recent months - reflecting the deep sense

of growing isolation, impotence, and even despair over such hostile anti-Jewish and anti-Israel episodes as Yasir Arafat's sensationalized appearance before the United Nations, the UNESCO pogrom against Israel, General Brown's not-so-casual attack on "the Jewish lobby" - the Vatican's sharp condemnation of anti-Semitism and its call to 600 million Catholic faithful to develop "sound relations" with their "Jewish brothers" inevitably assumed a heightened positive value that might not have been the case in other more placid circumstances.

Public relations, however useful its value in creating a public mood, is still a matter of 24-hour sensation, and is as ephemeral as yesterday's newspaper headlines. When the good feelings subside, there remains the actuality of the text. The issue that Jews and Christians need then to face is exactly what does the text communicate in verbum about the Vatican's considered views about Jews and Judaism to the Catholic faithful, who have been invited to employ the guidelines as a blueprint for conceptualizing or re-conceptualizing their fundamental attitudes and behavior to the Jewish people. It would appear the controversy that has arisen in response to the Guidelines derived paradoxically from the fact that many Catholics (and some Jews) of good will responded affirmatively to "the good press" given the Guidelines, which is of short term duration, while many Jews reacted to the ambiguities within the text itself, since its long-term consequences would be more influential than the erstwhile publicity.

It is understandable that professionals in Jewish-Christian relations , both Catholic and Jewish, would seek to emphasize in their public statements the positive elements of the document, since a Vatican imprimatur bestowed on the movement to improve Catholic-Jewish understanding is not a daily occurrence, and in fact, constitutes potentitally a significant boost for the promotion of interreligious friendship, especially in parts of the world where such efforts are lagging (as in Latin America). And yet, the avoidance of the ambiguous and even negative features of the guidelines risks the danger of fostering an illusion that critical issues outstanding between Jews and Christians have been resolved when they have not been resolved. Such illusions not only contradict the pursuit of truth - which one would think represenativites of Catholicism and Judaism would regard as one of their sacred obligations - but in fact pose the danger of laying a false cornerstone to the entire Catholic-Jewish enterprise which, on the slightest critical nudge, could come toppling down in a wreckage of disillusionment and mutual recrimination.

Something of that kind of illusion-fostering in the Jewish community is typically reflected in statement made to the Jerusalem Post on January 15, 1975 by Rabbi Henry Siegman, executive vice-president of the Synagogue Council of America:

"The three main developments in the field of Catholic-Jewish relations - the establishment of a commission on religious relations with the Jews; the publication of the Guidelines and suggestions for the implementation of Nostra Aetate; and the meeting between the Catholic-Jewish Liasion Committee and the Pope - cannot be considered separately. They are related, and are part of a very carefully thought-through

decision on the highest levels of the Catholic Church to get relations with World Jewry moving once again, and to assign a very high priority to this enterprise. For years, it had the lowest priority and this is what really represents a major shift in Vatican policy."

Similarly, Dr. Nahum Goldmann, president of the World Jewish Congress, welcomed the guidelines, saying:

"The Guidelines give Catholics guidance on a number of problems and show respect for Jewish sensitivities. They provide a good basis for future cooperation between Jews and Catholics. They reflect also a desire for good will and understanding, a spirit of mutual respect and the recognition of basic differences."

What do the Guidelines actually say, and do they justify these kinds of lyrical responses from the Jewish community?

An adequate and serious response to these questions, that seeks understanding beyond the level of public relations, requires an examination of the text of the Guidelines in relation to other recent major documents of the Catholic Church on Judaism and the Jews. The present document is not a ding an sich, but is the end-result of an evolving process of ideas about Judaism and the Jewish people in the Church that reached its climax during Vatican Council, and which has set into motion a series of significant theological reflections about these issues in various parts of the Catholic Church. Thus there is a body of systematically-developed ideas which have been formed during the past decade which constitute a living context within which the Guidelines should be analyzed, evaluated, and judged. In addition, there have taken place a number of events in the Vatican and elsewhere relating to Judaism and the Jewish people which need

to be taken into account as part of any critical analysis of the present state of Catholic-Jewish relations, ~~with the special reference to the Vatican~~

The present Vatican Guidelines cannot be fully understood without reference to antecedent Catholic documents. The four most significant documents are the following:

a) The "working document" on Catholic-Jewish relations prepared by the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity that was made public by Lawrence Cardinal Shehan of Baltimore in 1969;

b) The statement of the French Episcopal Committee for Relations with Judaism issued on April 18, 1973, with the title, "Pastoral Orientations with Regard to the Attitude of Christians Toward Judaism;"

c) The "Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations" issued by a subcommittee of the United States Catholic Bishops Commission for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs on March 16, 1967;

d) The "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" adopted by Vatican Council II on October 28, 1965.

It is only by comparative analysis of the content of the Vatican Guidelines with the positions taken in these other "milestone" declarations that one can justifiably ascertain whether there has been "progess" or "regression". Such evaluations are necessary for determining which features of the Guidelines are sound and acceptable by Jews as a basis for building programmatic relationships with Catholics, and which aspects are false or even offensive to Jewish consciousness and constitute a barrier to the

construction of authentic relationships based on honesty and truth.

The most relevant document for such a comparative analysis is the "working document" prepared by members of the Vatican Secretariat for the Promotions of Christian Unity. This 1969 document was in fact commissioned to serve as the basis "for preparing a Vatican statement on Catholic-Jewish relations," according to the Baltimore Catholic Review of April 1969, and, as it turns out, most of the positive? positions and practical suggestions for improving Catholic-Jewish relations that appear in the Vatican Guidelines are lifted, in some cases verbatim, from the working document. Thus, for example:

On anti-Semitism:

1969 document - "The dignity of the human person requires the condemnation of all forms of anti-Semitism (Nostra Aetate). In view of these relations of the Church and the Jewish people, it is easier to see how anti-Semitism is essentially opposed to the spirit of Christianity. Still more do these relations show forth the duty of better understanding and mututal esteem."

1975 Guidelines - "...we may simply restate here that the spiritual bonds and historical links binding the Church to Judaism condemn (as opposed to the very spirit of Christianity) all forms of anti-Semitism and discrimination, which in any case the dignity of the human person alone would suffice to condemn. Further still, these links and relationships render obligatory a better mutual understanding and renewed mutual esteem."

On Dialogue.

1969 document - "Relations between Christians and Jews have for

the most part been no more than a monlogue. A true dialogue must now be established. The dialogue, in effect, comprises a favore d means for promoting better mutual understanding and a deepeneing of one's own tradition. The dondition of dialogue is respect for the other as he is, for his faith and religious convictions. All intent of proselytizing and conversion is excluded.(Italics ours). Great openness of mind, distrust of one's own prejudices, and tact, such are the indispensable qualities required if one is not, even unconsciously, to offend the other party to the dialogue. In addition to fraternal conversations and biblical studies in common, meetings of competent persons to study problems that may arise are to be fostered."

1975 Guidelines/- "To tell the truth, such relations as there have been between Jew and Christian have scarcely ever risen above the level of monologue. From now on real dialogue must be established.

"Dialogue presupposes that each side wishes to know the other, and wishes to increase and deepen its knowledge of the other. It constitutes a particularly suitable means of favoring a better mutual knowledge, and especially in the case of dialogue between Jews and Christians, of probing the riches of one's own tradition. Dialogue demands respect for the other as he is; above all, respect for his faith and his religious convictions."

...."In addition to friendly talks, competent people will be encouraged to meet and to study together the many problems deriving from the fundamental convictions of Judaism and of Christianity. In order not to hurt (even involuntarily) those taking part, it will be vital to guarantee, not only tact, but a great openness of spirit and diffidence with respect to one's own prejudices."

On Joint Prayer:

1969 document - "Whenever possible and mutually desirable, meeting before God in prayer and silent meditation should be encouraged. This practice can create that openness of spirit and humility of heart so necessary for understanding of self and others. It is indicated in particular when dealing with major questions, such as those of justice and peace."

1975 Guidelines - "In whatever circumstances as shall prove possible and mutually acceptable, one might encourage a common meeting in the presence of God, in prayer and silent meditation, a highly efficacious way of finding that humility, that openness of heart and mind, necessar prerequisites for a deep knowledge of oneself and of others. In particular, that will be done in connection with great causes such as the struggle for peace and justice."

On Liturgy

1969 document - "We call to mind the strong link that binds the Christian liturgy to the Jewish liturgy, which continues to live in our own time. The fundamental conception of liturgy as expression of community life conceived as service of God and mankind is common to Jews and Christians. We grasp the importance for Jewish-Christian relations of an awarness of those common forms of prayer (texts, feasts, rites, etc.) in which the Bible holds an essential place.

"An effort must be made to understand better that the Old Testament (possesses a proper validity of its own). The Old Testament should not be understood exclusively in reference to the New Testament, nor reduced to an allegorical significance, as is so often done in the Christian liturgy. ..The continuity of our faith with that of the Old Covenant should be underscored."

(1969 document:)

Particular attention should be paid to translations of certain passages or expressions in the New Testament "which can be interepreted in tendentious fashion by uninformed Christians." Thus, the phrase 'the Jews' in St. John can at times be translated according to conext, by / 'the leaders of the Jews' or 'the enemies of Jesus.'

These expressions"give a better rendering of the thought of the evangelist and avoid the appearance of involving the Jewish people as such."

1975 GUidelines - "The existing links between the Christiant liturgy and the Jewish liturgy will be borne in mind. The idea of a living community in the service of God, and in the service of men for the love of God, such as it is realised in the liturgy, is just as characteristic of the Jewish liturgy as it is of theChristian one. To improve Jewish-Christian relations, it is important to take cognizance of those common elements of the liturgical life (formulas, feasts, rites, etc.) in which the Bible holds an essential place.

"An effort will be made to acquire a better understanding of whatever in the Old Testament retians its perpetual value (cf. Dei Verbum, 14-15), since that has not been cancelled by the laterinterpretatiom of the New Testament. Rather, the New Testament brings out the full meaning of the Old, while both Old and New illumine and explain each other (cf. ibid, 16). This is all the more important since liturgical reform is now beringing the text of the Old Testament ever more frequently to the attention of Christians.

"When commenting on biblical texts, emphasis will be laid on the continuity of our faith with that of the earlier Covenant, in the perspective of the promises, without minimizing those elements of

Christianity which are orighnal. We believe that those promises were fulfilled with the first coming of Christ. But it is none the less true that we still await their perfect fulfillment in his glorious return at the end of time.

"With respect to liturgical readings, care will be taken to see that homilies based on them will not distort their meaning, especially when it is a question of passages which seem to show the Jewish people as such in an unfavorable light. Efforts will be made so to instruct the Christian people that they will understand the true interpretation of all the texts and their meaning for the contemporary believer.

"Commissions entrusted with the task of liturgical translations will pay particular attention to the way in which they express those phrases and passages which Christians, if not well informed, might misunderstand because of prejudice. Obvisouly, one cannot alter the text of the Bible. The point is that, with a version destined for liturgical use, there should be an overriding preoccupation to bring out explicitly the meaning of the text, while taking scriptural studies into account. (Foonote #1; "Thus the formula 'the Jews', in St. John, sometimes according to the context means 'the leaders of the Jews,' or 'the adversaries of Jesus,' terms which express better the thought of the evangelist and avoid appearing to arraign the Jewish people as such. Another example is the use of the words 'pharisee' and 'pharisaism' which have taken on a largely pejorative meaning."

"The preceding remarks also apply to introductions to biblical readings, to the Prayer of the Faithful, and to commentaries printed in Missals used by the laity."

On Teaching andEducation:

1969 document/ - The Old Testament and Jewish tradition should not be opposed to the New Testament "in such a way as to make it appear as a religion of justicealone, a religion of fear and of legalism, implying that only Christianity poseesses the law of love and freedom."

Christians should bear in mind that that the points on which Jesus, a Jews, took issue with the Judaism of his time 'are fewer than those in which he found himself in agreement with it."

Recalling the declaration of Vatican Council II that 'what happened in Jesus' Passion cannot be blamed upon all the Jews then living, without distinction, nor upon the Jews of today," the 1969 document stressed that "the history of Judaism does not end with the destruction of Jerusalem, but continues to develop in a rich spiritual tradition."

The document stresses the desirability of implementing its recommendations and directives on "all levels of Christian education," urging that, wherever possible, "a chair on Judaism should be established in Catholic colleges."

1975 Guidelines - (quote p. 3, III)

Joint Social Action:
On Religious Liberty:

1969 document - Jews and Christians should collaborate willingly in the pursuit of social justice and peace" on local, national, and international levels.

1975 Guidelines -"Jewish and Christian tradition, founded on the Word of God, is aware of the value of the human person, the image of God. Love of the same God must show itself in effective action for the good of mankind. In the spirit of the prophets, Jews and Christians will work willingly together, seeking social justice and peace at every level - local,national, and international.

"At the same time, such collaboration can do much to foster mutural understading and esteem."

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The comparison of the 1969 Vatican "working document" and the 1975 Vatican Guidelines demonstrates how fundamentally alike both documents are, and how dependent the latter document is on the former both for its content, its specific proposals, as well as for much of its rhetoric. And yet there are crucial differences between the two declarations, and the differences demonstrate precisely what Vatican authorities today refuse to affirm in their attitudes toward Jews and Judaism. So strongly do those authorities feel about those differences that they felt compelled to excise them from the official Guidelines or else reformulate them in a way that would express their doctrinal mentality. Since one introduction to the Guidelines characterized this document as the "magna charta" on Catholic-

Jewish relations for the entire Catholic church throughout the world, it would seem to be of more than passing importance for serious students and practitioners in Catholic-Jewish relations to ponder these rejected views and weigh their meaning in any realistic appraisal of the Vatican's present relationship to the Jewish people.

What are these differences that were denied incoporation in the official Guidelines? They are essentially four-fold: the first has to do with the Catholic Church's official attitude to Judaism as a living religion; the second, the Church's attitudes on conversion and proselytization with regard to Jews; the third, the Church's sense of responsibility for Jewish suffering in the Christian West; and fourth, the Church's attitude toward the meaning of Israel and Jerusalem to Judaism and the Jewish people. From a "normative" Jewish perspective, one is justified in asserting that avoiding these issues, or talking out of both sides of the mouth at the same time on these questions, is to do nothing less than to trifle with the central and basic substance of Jewish self-consciousness in the modern world, hardly a basis for "mutual understanding and reciprocal esteem."

Where the 1969 "working document" was forthright and unambiguous in its views regarding each of these fundamental issues, the 1975 Vatican Guidelines is frequently evasive, ambivalent, even doubletalking. Speaking to the question of the Catholic Church's present theological understanding of Judaism, the 1969 document declares:

"Coggizance is increasingly being gained in the Church of the actual place of the Jewish people in the history of salvation and of its permanent election. This fact points toward a theological renewal and toward a new Christian reflection on the Jewish people that it is

important to pursue. On the other hand, it appears that still too often that Christians do not know what Jews are. They do not, in any case, see them as they are in themselves and as they define themselves in their present and living reality, as the people of the Bible living in our midst. They do not see them as that people which in its history has encountered the living and true God, the one God Who established with that people a covenant, of which circumcision is the sign, the God Who accomplished in its favor a miraculous Exodus, which it relives each year in its Passover, both as a remembrance of its past and an expectation of the full realization of its promises. This same God has revealed Himself to His people Israel and made to it the gift of the Torah. And He has confided to it a word that "endures forever" (Isaiah 40,8), a word that has become an unquenchable source of life and prayer, in a tradition that has not ceased to enrich itself through the centuries."

Such a vivid and empathic appreciation of Judaism as a living religion, a permanent source of truth and value for the Jewish people, unquestionably represents a basic shift in the Christian world-view toward Judaism. Had Vatican authorities adopted that theology of Judaism from the 1969 document, as if they found it possible to appropriate the many "practical" suggestions from that text, they would have formulated a set of Guidelines that would have rightly deserved to be called "historic". ~~For this new theology of Judaism~~ Instead, they chose to evade this core question, and ended up by trying to carry water on both shoulders, with inevitable splashing about to the dissatisfaction of both serious Catholics and Jews